

United States Naval Academy  
(The Ernest Flagg Plan)  
Annapolis  
Anne Arundel County  
Maryland

HABS No. MD-329

HABS  
MD,  
2-ANNA,  
65-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D. C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

UNITED STATES NAVAL ACADEMY  
(The Ernest. Flagg Plan)

HABS No. MD-329

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MD,  
2-ANNA,  
65-

Location: Annapolis, Maryland

Present Owner: United States Government

Present Occupant  
and Use: U.S. Naval Academy

Significance: Ernest Flagg's plan for the United States Naval Academy is one of the major American exercise in the Beaux-Arts style of architecture. Although later modifications have altered his original concept, the major elements of his plan--rigid axial symmetry, classically inspired buildings, and impressive siting--remain to define the essential character of the Academy.

PART I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (taken from "Report of the Executive Director on the Proposed Demolition of Isherwood Complex, U.S. Naval Academy, prepared by the President's Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, Washington, D.C., August 1979, page 3.):

"The Naval Academy was founded at Annapolis, Maryland, in 1845 on 10 acres of land that included an old Army fortification, Fort Severn. Today the Academy has more than 300 acres of land and more than 200 buildings. The original student body numbered eighty with a faculty of seven; today the faculty is more than 500 and the midshipmen (and women) number 4,350.

"The development of the Academy was interrupted by the Civil War, but after 1865 numerous improvements were made in the physical plant, with more than fifty buildings being added to the original fourteen. By the end of the century, the inconvenience and the aesthetic deficiencies of a campus that had developed in a haphazard manner became apparent. The Board of Visitors for 1895 made the following report:

The Board feels that the Naval Academy should be an institution second to none of its kind in the world, that it should meet every modern requirement as an institution of learning, not only as to the instruction given but as to the convenience of accommodation offered officers, instructors, and cadets. It feels that the present buildings are insufficient and inadequate for the purpose to which they were assigned and that a reconstruction of buildings, grounds, and sanitation, upon the most approved modern and architectural sanitary lines, will not only be an incalculable benefit to the Naval service, but a progressive step which will meet the approval of the whole country.

Acting on this recommendation, the Secretary of the Navy appointed a commission on July 5, 1895, to report on existing conditions at the Academy and recommend improvements. The commission invited Ernest Flagg, an eminent architect schooled in Paris under the patronage of Cornelius Vanderbilt II and primarily a practitioner of the Beaux-Arts style, "to assist in the preparation of a plan which should embody the ideas of the Commission." Flagg's plan was submitted with the report of the Commission in January 1896. In 1899 the Navy commissioned him to rebuild the Academy.

## PART II. THE FLAGG PLAN

Ernest Flagg was already a widely celebrated architect by the time he became involved with the Naval Academy. He had studied architecture at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1880 and was to become one of the more prolific architects of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Among his many well-known works are the Singer Tower (1907), Flagg Court (1933), and the two buildings for Charles Scribner and Sons (1894 and 1913), all in New York. In Washington, D.C., Flagg designed the Corcoran Gallery of Art (1897), considered a forerunner of the Beaux-Arts influence in the capital which changed the aspect of the city from the 19th-century picturesque to 20th-century monumental classic. In addition to architectural works, Flagg was a frequent contributor to architectural journals, commenting on the works of other Beaux-Arts-trained architects and the theory of architecture.

In being given the commission to replan the Naval Academy he was presented with an architect's dream, the opportunity to design a major complex of national significance, the focus of international attention; to exercise his opinions, judgements and tastes upon a vast project, combining the functional and aesthetic design of individual buildings with the comprehensive design of the interrelationships of a complex. Flagg was not shy of the opportunity, nor was his scheme shy of the exigencies of costs, government accountants, and bureaucratic foot dragging. Flagg was to express disappointment at the ultimate manifestation of his plans, at times seeming to take the reductions in scale, scope, and material as a personal affront. His published accounts of the Academy are marked with complaints over a misguided and inappropriate attempt at economy for which the Academy and the nation as a whole would eventually suffer. He was, despite his complaints, unusually fortunate in being one of the few planners and designers of comparable institutions to have his general ideas and his basic plan treated with respect by subsequent planners, both government and private, and to have changes to his accomplished work made with unusual respect and sensitivity. In this Flagg may not necessarily be able to take credit as a designer of particular worth. He was, in effect, given the opportunity to construct instant traditions. The very traditional nature of the Academy was such that a great deal of inertia toward change was the inevitable result of any plan, regardless of the designer. There is an instant reverence for the institution that is immediately and readily transferred to its buildings and grounds. Flagg's highly iconographic designs, full of classical references and nautical/military allusions, could only encourage this. They are redolent with the "VIRTU" of the Beaux-Arts concept of the "White City," with its associations and connotations.

The plan and the appearance of the buildings were the inevitable results of Flagg's background and training, and of his time and place. The City Beautiful Movement; the Ascendency of the Ecole de Beaux Arts (which Flagg attended) as the source of architectural taste in the western world; and the proliferation of International Expositions which first introduced and then established the Beaux Arts as the style, all created a climate of easy acceptability for Flagg's preeminently Beaux-Art scheme.

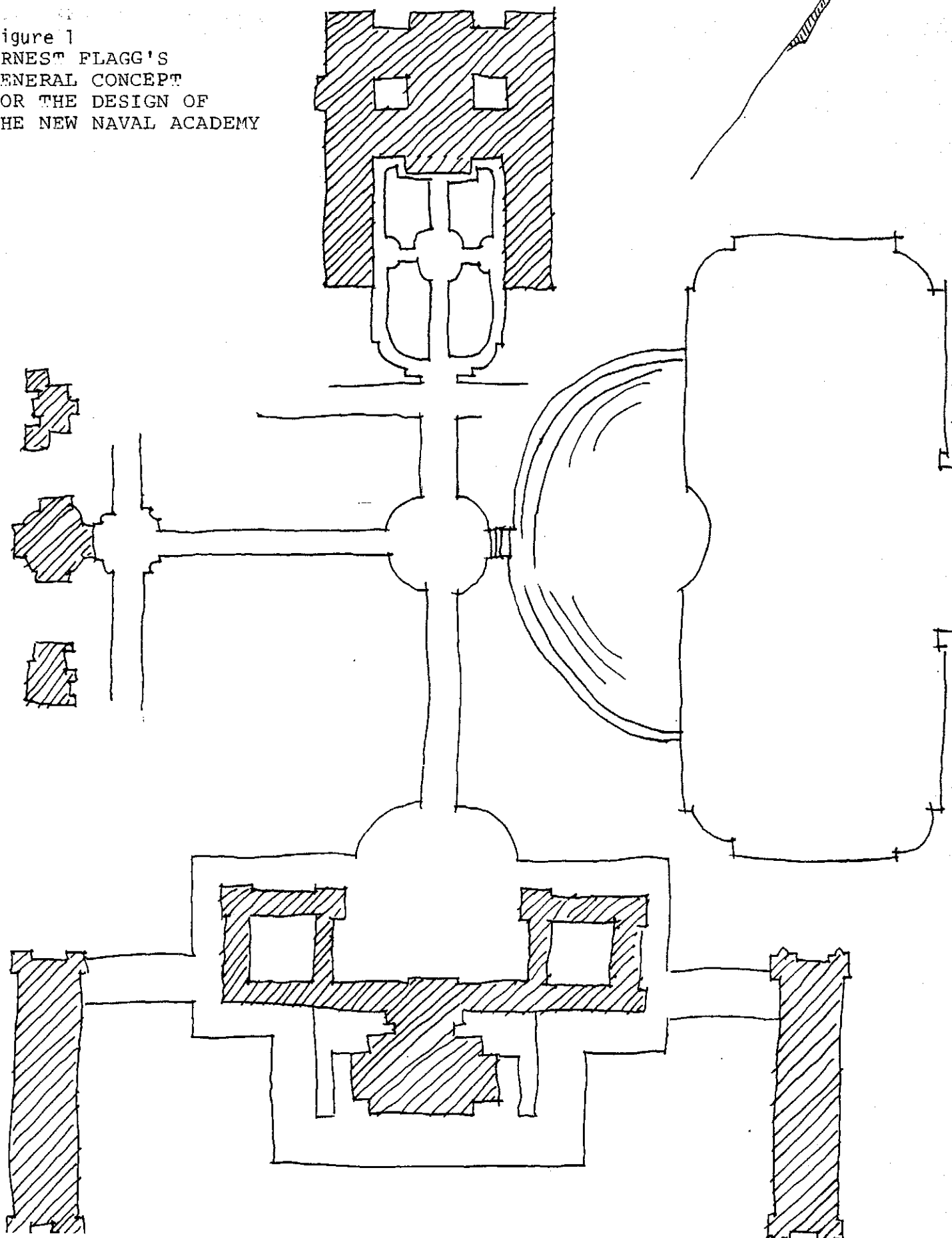
Flagg began with the Academy as it existed, and abstracting a few of its elements, built his plan around them. The old Fort Severn was retained for a while, largely for sentimental reasons, perhaps also because its circular plan was a nice counterpoint to the angularity and axuality of Flagg's design. The quadrangle and its trees, and the long walk with the Tripoli monument across the quad, were also retained and helped to organize the plan. The SE - NW axis of the walk, which later became Chauvenet walk, a subsidiary path, provided the governing axis of the plan. Disposed around the four sides of the quadrangle were the four elements of the plan:

1. On the southwest was the Chapel, flanked by two smaller buildings. These eventually turned out to be the superintendent's quarters and the administration building, but have various designations on other plans. Their particular use seems not to have been critical, at least in relation to other parts of the plan. Placed on the highest ground of the Academy, the Chapel was clearly the element of this side, and was to be the "jewel" of the composition. From the beginning it was conceived as a center-plan church. The first sketches show that it was planned more as a circular building than as a Greek Cross, with circular aisles around the rotunda, filling in the spaces between the arms. In execution, the circular aisles were eliminated, and the building was completed according to the general concept of a Greek Cross. (See also THE ACADEMY CHAPEL (MD-329-1) and SUPERINTENDENT'S QUARTERS (MD-329-5).
2. On the northwest was the academic group, a major building housing the library and a major lecture hall, with classroom wings enclosing a forecourt, screened by a monumental colonnade between the wings. To the southwest was a separate building for physics and engineering to the northeast, at a good distance, on made-land or on a pier in the Severn, were the power plant and utility buildings. (See also MAHAN HALL, MAURY HALL, SAMPSON HALL (MD-329-6).
3. On the southeast was the mammoth complex of midshipman's quarters flanked by an armory and a boat house, the three connected by colonnade terraces, a symmetrical composition around the major axis of the quarters. This was at least begun as planned. (See also BANCROFT HALL (MD-329-2, MACDONOUGH HALL (MD-329-3) and DAHLGREN HALL (MD-329-4).

4. The final side of the quadrangle was water, appropriately enough. A boat basin was to be made between the power-house pier and the boat house, with seawalls on the northeast with beacons at the ends, and with an amphitheater on the southwest. The basin was completed, without the beacons or the amphitheater. Flagg expected to be disappointed in this, however, as he had issued a warning in the articles published in the American Architect that this particular element was crucial to the success of the plan. In Flagg's case, the basin suggests the extent of his symbolic intention. It was not enough that the campus should be swarming with dolphins, nose-diving from parapets or juggling lamps in interior halls, or with ships prows and sails, or the myriad appearances of the Academy Shield. The basin would make the water, tamed and within the embrace of man, express a synergistic relationship between sailors and sea.

The relevant elements of Flagg's plan appear in figure 1 at the end of this report. If one adds to this the Chauvenet Walk, removes the amphitheater, and tones down the Academic Complex, the plan becomes roughly that which was executed and now forms the core of the Academy. The Tripoli Monument, which was originally at the northwest end of Chauvenet Walk, was moved to the west, to a small plaza between the present Preble and Leahy halls. Blake Road, the street before the chapel, had to be moved into a shallow arc when the nave was later extended. The curvilinear walks at the chapel end of the quadrangle seem to predate the rebuilding of the Academy, and have been made permanent with concrete paving. They may, in fact, be the oldest elements of the present plan, and are certainly among them. The bandstand was added near the Chapel in 1922. The basin forming the fourth side of the quadrangle was not filled in until 1960. The new buildings which define the NE side of the quadrangle at this time are on the site of the basin. (Figure 2, end of this report).

Figure 1  
ERNEST FLAGG'S  
GENERAL CONCEPT  
FOR THE DESIGN OF  
THE NEW NAVAL ACADEMY



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PART III. SOURCES

A. Original and unpublished sources:

The excellent collection under the title "Grounds" (available at the Archives in Nimitz Library at the Academy) clearly details the development of the overall plan of the physical plant from 1845 onward. Ultimately, it is planned for all the Flagg drawings to be housed here. Of particular interest are:

- A. "United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, Plan for proposed rebuilding, Ernest Flagg, Arch't," undated, shows the ideal Flagg scheme.
- B. Plan No. 26: "Plan of Naval Academy Grounds Showing proposed extension and improvements now being made" dated Feb. 14, 1900, deals with filling in the Severn River to accommodate the new plan.
- C. Plan No. 701: "Revised Plan of the Naval Academy showing old and new arrangement and extension to grounds" dated Dec. 19, 1902, with revisions to Nov. 10, 1910. An excellent instructive overlay of the two conditions. This document shows the relocation of the Tripoli Monument.
- D. Plan, dated June 30, 1924, of the Naval Academy, and subsequently updated.

Also in the Archives are the Houghton Hawley (spelling uncertain) views, 1899. (Available mounted on cardboard or in a printed folio at the Archives.) These views are renderings from a bird's eye perspective of Flagg's final concept for the rebuilding of the Academy. According to Flagg's own account, this set of drawings seems to best exemplify his optimum plan. The relationship between the present Academy and this intention are readily apparent in this plan, although the differences in the buildings as they were constructed are often striking. All buildings are represented in some form, from Bancroft Hall very much as built, through the first stages of the Chapel, to the much more elaborate conceptions for the academic buildings, now the Mahan complex. The conception for the boat basin and its relationship with the present MacDonough Hall is very clear.

B. Published Sources:

Flagg, Ernest, "New Buildings for the U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland," in The American Architect and Building News, in two parts: Vol. XCIV, No. 1697, July 1, 1908; and No. 1698, July 8, 1908. Much information on the original and subsequently thwarted intention of the architect. There are no better published photographs from any



era of the academy's history than those presented here. Several excellent detailed drawings of plans, sections, and elevations are also included. This is the single best source for documenting the early Flagg work, regardless of the extensive editorializing.

C. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated:

National Archives and Record Service, GSA, Washington, D.C.: The major body of material which was left unexamined but seems to have some potential for filling in a few details in here. Sufficient material was available at the Academy and is Annapolis to answer the relevant questions raised by this study, and time did not permit a visit to the National Archives. Specifically, three collections are of interest:

Relating to Buildings and Grounds  
1858-1910

115. LETTERS SENT AND RECEIVED AND CONTRACTS FOR CONSTRUCTION AND GRADING WORK AT THE ACADEMY. June 1858-June 1860. 1 vol. (No. 675). 1 in. Arranged chronologically. A table of contents is in back of the volume.

Fair copies of letters and contracts relating to the erection of repair of buildings, grading of grounds, and supply of materials for the Academy. Included are numerous drawings and scale plans of buildings to be constructed.

116. PRESS COPIES OF LETTERS SENT BY THE SUPERINTENDENT RELATING TO THE PROPOSED REBUILDING OF THE ACADEMY. Mar. 1895-May 1899. 1 vol. (Nos 503). 1 in. Arranged chronologically. No index.

Letters relating to the proposal to erect new buildings at the Academy. A commission to study the condition of Academy buildings was appointed by the Secretary of the Navy in conformity with a resolution adopted by the Board of Visitors in 1895. A copy of the report of the Board, January 1896, citing the poor condition of the existing buildings is included.

117. PRESS COPIES OF LETTERS SENT BY THE  
SUPERINTENDENT RELATING TO BUILD-  
INGS AND GROUNDS. Dec. 1902-Mar. 1910.  
23 vols. (Nos. 460-482). 3 ft.

Arranged chronologically. A name index is in  
volume 460 and a very incomplete name index is in  
volume 461. No indexes in other volumes.

Include some copies of letters sent by the  
officer in charge of buildings and grounds, however  
they are not duplicated in entry 181. Letters sent by  
the Superintendent after March 11, 1910, are copied  
in his letterpress books, described in entry 3. Letters  
sent by the Superintendent to the Bureau of Naviga-  
tion (Jan. 1905-May 1907) relating to buildings and  
grounds are contained in entry 17.

#### PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This work was produced by John D. Hnedak, Architectural Historian, Annapolis, Maryland, as consultant to the National Architectural and Engineering Record, with the assistance of Janet Davis, Architectural Historian, Baltimore, Maryland. We gratefully acknowledge the generous assistance of Mrs. Price of the Naval Academy Archives, Nimitz Hall, and her staff; of Mr. E. B. Miles of the Office of Public Works, Naval Academy and of the staff who work with him in the office of Real Estate, the Plan Vault and the Duplicating Room; and of Captain Gaworkowitz at the office of Public Works.